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“Celebrating Susan Glaspell when *Trifles* turns 100”

Interview with Martha C. Carpentier and Barbara Ozieblo (cofounders of
the Susan Glaspell Society)

Noelia Hernando-Real



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"Celebrating Susan Glaspell when *Trifles* turns 100"

Interview with Martha C. Carpentier and Barbara Ozieblo (cofounders of the Susan Glaspell Society)

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The International Susan Glaspell Society: Website

- 1 <http://blogs.shu.edu/glaspellsociety/>

[Figure 1]



Credits: International Susan Glaspell Society banner. Copyright: Martha C. Carpentier.

Biographies of the Interviewees:

- 2 Martha C. Carpentier
- 3 Professor of English at Seton Hall University, cofounder of the Susan Glaspell Society; first elected vice president (2003-2009), and second elected president (2009-2015).
- 4 Barbara Ozieblo
- 5 Professor of North American literature at University of Málaga, cofounder of the Susan Glaspell Society, first elected president (2003-2009) and current elected member of its Executive Committee.

- 6 Martha C. Carpentier and Barbara Ozieblo cofounded the Susan Glaspell Society in 2003, served as first vice president and president, respectively, for two terms, and have published widely on Susan Glaspell. Barbara Ozieblo authored the first comprehensive biography of Susan Glaspell, *Susan Glaspell: A Critical Biography* (U of North Carolina P, 2000) and the "Susan Glaspell" section in *Susan Glaspell and Sophie Treadwell*, written in collaboration with Jerry Dickey (Routledge, 2008), as well as over twenty articles and book chapters on Glaspell. Together with Martha Carpentier, Ozieblo coedited *Disclosing Intertextualities: The Stories, Plays and Novels of Susan Glaspell* (Rodopi, 2006). Martha C. Carpentier authored the first thorough analysis of Glaspell's novels, *The Major Novels of Susan Glaspell* (U of Florida P, 2002). She was also the editor of *Susan Glaspell: New Directions in Critical Inquiry* (CSP, 2008), the coeditor of *Her America: "A Jury of Her Peers" and Other Stories by Susan Glaspell*, together with Patricia Bryan (U of Iowa P, 2010); and of *Susan Glaspell's Trifles and "A Jury of Her Peers": Centennial Essays, Interviews and Adaptations*, with Emeline Jouve (McFarland, 2015).

The Interview

Noelia Hernando-Real: Susan Glaspell (1876-1948) was an American playwright, actress, novelist, short-story writer and journalist. Her oeuvre spans fifteen plays, nine novels, a biography, over fifty short stories, a book for children and numerous articles. She co-founded the Provincetown Players, the New York-based little theater group that revolutionized the American stage in the 1910s and 1920s. She was also one of the galvanizing forces behind many of the playwrights of the group which literary history has incorporated into the canon and/or celebrated, from Eugene O'Neill to Edna St Vincent Millay and Djuna Barnes. This year, 2016, celebrates the centennial of the turning point in the history of theater in the United States. It was in the summer of 1916 that the Provincetown Players were officially founded in the little town at the tip of Cape Cod, Massachusetts, from which the company took its name. By the end of the summer, they had decided to continue their adventure in New York City, an adventure that lasted till 1922, when Susan Glaspell and her husband, George Cram Cook, left for Greece. One of the reasons that led the company to transplant their experimental theater from Provincetown to New York City was the success of *Trifles*, a one-act play by Glaspell that premiered in the Wharf Theatre in the summer of 1916. It is a pleasure for me to interview Barbara Ozieblo and Martha Carpentier, co-founders of the Susan Glaspell Society, scholars I have always admired and who, I am proud to say, are now colleagues and friends. We met thanks to Glaspell and have continued working together thanks to Glaspell too.

Noelia Hernando-Real: Before asking you questions about the Society, I'd like to know what drew you to Susan Glaspell in the first place. What did you find so special in her and her works? What was the first Glaspell work you read??

Martha Carpentier: Linda Ben-Zvi has described coming upon Glaspell in the stacks of the library while doing research on Beckett and being shocked by the discovery, and by never having heard of her work before. I think most of the Glaspell scholars of my generation have had a similar experience – certainly I did. I am not a drama or theater scholar; I am not even an Americanist. My field at the time was specifically British modernism, but during that fallow period after my dissertation was done and I was looking for new subjects, I did some background reading about Greenwich Village bohemia of the early 20th century and stumbled upon Glaspell. Who is this writer? Never heard of her! *Nine* novels?!? Never heard of any of them. They must be bad, was my initial naïve assumption. Then I read the novels, one by one, and her major plays, and my mind was blown by how good they were! How could a writer of

this caliber be so thoroughly hidden and forgotten? I remember distinctly deciding to devote myself to reassessing her novels and revising her reputation. This project also became, necessarily, my introduction to feminist literary theory, which I had never encountered in graduate school, and which was formative to my own development. So discovering Glaspell had a profound influence on me as a person and as a scholar.

Barbara Ozieblo: I read about Glaspell in Chris Bigsby's *Twentieth Century American Drama* after meeting him at a seminar in Cambridge organized by the British Council. We didn't talk about Glaspell then, but I bought his first volume, which had just been published, and was excited to read that one of the most important American dramatists was a woman. I then discovered Elaine Showalter's *The New Feminist Criticism* and the essays in which Glaspell's "A Jury of Her Peers" is discussed. Theater has always been a passion of mine – I have both acted and directed in the past – and was looking for a new research topic, so Susan Glaspell was a logical choice. Glaspell attracted me for a number of reasons: she was a woman playwright – and that was the time when feminism appeared to be the only line of literary criticism worth pursuing! And, I have never revealed this before, but she died the year I was born so there was an invisible link that drew me to her! I don't remember what I read first; probably "A Jury of Her Peers" and then *Trifles*. In the 80s, working in Spain meant that getting hold of unpublished or out of print material was impossible; there was no internet, no Amazon, no credit card even . . . so I had to get funding to do research in the USA!

NHR: Isn't it great then? That you two, one a fiction scholar and the other a drama scholar, were both drawn to Glaspell and started working together to help rediscover Glaspell? This leads to my next question. It's been said that Glaspell's case is like that of many other women writers moved to the margins of literary history by the canon. However, I'd say that Glaspell's case is even more painful. She was recovered by feminist scholars in the late 1960s, but it seems interest in her comes and goes like the tide. In contrast, other US women writers, such as Kate Chopin or Charlotte Perkins Gilman, or even modernist artists with whom Glaspell worked, such as Edna St. Vincent Millay or Djuna Barnes, once "resuscitated" continue to enjoy critical appraisal. Why do you think this is not Glaspell's case?

Barbara Ozieblo: None of the writers you mention is primarily known as a playwright. I think the theater is an area that presents even greater difficulty for women than the genres of the novel, of poetry or of the short story or the essay. Women working in the theater in the USA are still struggling for parity in all the fields entailed in producing a play. But I don't quite agree with you! The reviews of her plays when they do find a producer are always quite wonderful – "a gem," "a lost masterpiece" – is the sort of language reviewers use.

NHR: Absolutely! Yes, when reviewers and critics do get to review Glaspell's works, they are usually very enthusiastic; my perspective, though, is that they do not have many chances to do it; that Glaspell's rediscovery somehow has not been completed. And what do you think, Martha?

Martha Carpentier: I have always maintained that the only women writers that feminist scholarship in this country ever really effectively restored to the canon were Kate Chopin and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and even in those cases, only *The Awakening* and *The Yellow Wallpaper* are ever taught even today. It has been very difficult trying to get Glaspell back into the canon, and very discouraging. I remember in the 1990's trying to get the Feminist Press to reprint one of her novels

and being turned down! Finally in 2010, due in large part to my co-editor's [Patricia Bryan's] contacts at University of Iowa, we finally got them to reprint a collection of Glaspell's short stories. With two major biographies of Glaspell, several critical monographs, and a host of essay collections published, Glaspell scholars have accomplished a great deal, but I agree her reputation remains less than it should be. And, like Chopin and Gilman, everyone knows the one great work, *Trifles*, and leaves it at that. There are a host of reasons, I think, and certainly not only that she is a woman writer. First, Glaspell cannot be critically pigeon-holed. She is a great dramatist *and* a great fiction-writer, excelling in plays, novels *and* short stories. But it is rare that a writer can be accepted as great in more than one genre; usually critics have to elevate one and denigrate the others. I think Glaspell's drama has enjoyed more revival than her fiction simply because most Glaspell scholars are theater scholars and because theater people are not as hidebound as literature professors. Also, despite Glaspell's experiments with expressionism, she is fundamentally a realist writer, especially in her fiction, and thus does not enjoy the modernist chic of a Djuna Barnes. But as far as her drama goes, can those decades of Eugene O'Neill being regarded as solely the father of American drama ever really be effaced? What would it mean to truly grant Glaspell the place she deserves in the history of American theater? It would necessitate overturning sacred myths that apparently we still cling to. As far as her novels go, I have published a detailed comparison of Glaspell with Willa Cather, an American Midwestern woman writer with whom she shares many qualities. Cather published with Knopf, who promoted her work steadily throughout the 20th century and continues to do so today. Glaspell published her novels with the Frederick A. Stokes company, bought by J.B. Lippincott in 1941, which had no investment in promoting Glaspell's reputation. They contributed the metal plates for her books to the war effort, thus ending any possibility of reprints and dooming her reputation as a fiction writer. A final reason points to Glaspell herself. Unlike Cather, and indeed unlike O'Neill, Glaspell was not a self-promoter. She was a strong but very modest person who hid herself in the shadows of others, most notably her husband George Cram Cook, so when he died in 1924 I think she lost her greatest advocate and promoter.

NHR: Well, she's found advocates and promoters in the members of the Susan Glaspell Society, hasn't she? So, what moved you to found the Susan Glaspell Society? Whose idea was it and how did you organize it all?

Barbara Ozieblo: It was Martha's idea. She got in touch with me after my biography of Glaspell was published and invited me to participate in a panel on Glaspell she was putting together. I hesitated. I thought my work on Glaspell was finished and that I should move on to other things, but I accepted, and we met . . . quite funny, actually. We agreed to share a room at the conference, we'd not met before, so it was a great way to meet and talk and plan the future!

Martha Carpentier: In 2003, Basia organized several panels on Glaspell at SSAWW in Philadelphia, and I organized a panel on Glaspell at the Louisville modernism conference. We had been corresponding prior to that and Basia had reviewed my book, *The Major Novels of Susan Glaspell*. We each gave papers on each other's panels, and we roomed together at both conferences. It was for us a natural next step in the project we were both devoted to: revising Glaspell's reputation. It was our idea and we proposed it to the others who were on Basia's SSAWW panels: Mary E. Papke, Marcia Noe, Lucia V. Sander, and Susan Koprince, and they immediately agreed.

Because the demands of MLA for creating author societies were too onerous, we founded the society under the auspices of SSAWW and with the help of Sharon Harris.

NHR: Talking about the early days of the society, how was it initially received at major conferences, such as ATDS, ALA or SSAWW? Did you at some point feel you had to make a case for Glaspell?

Barbara Ozieblo: We were very well received initially by all three organizations and I don't remember "having to make a case" for Glaspell. We submitted good, strong panels and they were accepted. The problem with SSAWW was – and I believe still is – their focus on the 19th century, which rather excludes Glaspell! But even they have been very receptive to our play readings. And then we do seem to have difficulty in attracting an audience – scholars at conferences are interested in their field, and mostly not open to new topics.

NHR: Is this also how you see it, Martha?

Martha Carpentier: Ironically, our reception at ALA was much more immediate and wholehearted than at SSAWW. Granted, attendance at our panels and readings was never great at either conference, but at ALA we formed bonds with other author societies, like the Eugene O'Neill Society, the Thornton Wilder Society, etc., and we mutually supported each other, creating the "Five Dramatist Societies" group that, with the cooperation of Alfred Bendixen, allowed us to schedule panels non-competitively against each other and to create panels under shared general topic headings. I agree with Basia that in those days SSAWW was very devoted to 19th century fiction, and it was very "clickish." I felt they had absolutely no interest in Glaspell, although I do remember the play reading we did there that was attended by Judith Fetterley! She was astounded by how good Glaspell's work was and we had a great post-reading conversation with her.

NHR: I can imagine! Barbara, as the first president, what was your main goal and the main obstacle you encountered?

Barbara Ozieblo: I really do prefer Basia to Barbara!! The main goal was to make Glaspell better known and to draw more scholars to her work, which was why we decided to put together a volume of essays on her writing [*Disclosing Intertextualities*], and to encourage people to present papers. It's difficult to pinpoint the main obstacle – initially, it was still not that easy to find her plays, and even more difficult to find her novels and short stories, so scholars were concentrating on the four plays published by Chris [Christopher Bigsby] in 1987. We do now have the *Complete Plays* so there's no excuse as far as Glaspell's plays go. It's still not easy to find all her novels, though.

NHR: So... Basia, how much do you think the society has accomplished so far? Name your achievement number one as president of the society.

Barbara Ozieblo: We have accomplished a lot! We are recognized by other dramatist societies, both the Eugene O'Neill and the Arthur Miller society have invited us to participate in their conferences, and we are part of what began as the Five Drama Societies, as Martha has pointed out. Glaspell's plays are being performed in London and in New York. I think that is our achievement number one, and I think credit should go to Martha, who set up the web page which has given us visibility! And I'd like to take this opportunity to thank Martha for all her work for the ISGS; she was supportive and encouraging while I was president and was a wonderful president when my term ended!

NHR: I totally agree with Basia that the website was a very timely tool. Martha, now you are a member of the ISGS Executive Committee ex-officio, but you are the webmaster too; this is a position you've always held. Could you tell us a bit of what people can find there? Do you know how many visits the site receives? And to what extent do you think the website has helped find new members?

Martha Carpentier: The website at the beginning was absolutely essential to the growth and outreach of our Society. Today I think that role has passed largely to the Facebook page, but still the website functions as the gateway to membership in the Society, and as I had envisioned it at the start, as an online archive of our achievements in Glaspell scholarship and performance.¹ The website contains a biographical introduction to Glaspell written by Basia, a history of our Society and by-laws, summaries of our conference activity dating back to 2003 and up to the present, a contemporary performance history of each play, descriptions of and links to recent publications on Glaspell, and bibliographies of primary and secondary sources. I have recently added to the "Resources" page material from the Drake University library archives such as PDFs of Glaspell's newspaper coverage of the Hossack trial, and Milbre Burch's *Trifles* timeline, which is an invaluable resource for teachers. And most importantly, the website features the Paypal option for dues and membership enrollment.

NHR: Martha, I'd like you to consider now the same questions I asked Basia earlier. As the first vice president, what was your main goal and the main obstacle you encountered? How much do you think the society has accomplished so far? Name your achievement number one as president of the society.

Martha Carpentier: My main goal was to support Basia and together with her, to create and encourage as much Glaspell conference activity and publication as possible. I also took charge of creating the website which, in pre-facebook days, had a great impact on spreading our reputation, and Glaspell's. Given that I was vice president for six years and president for six years, I take the governance of the Society to be my greatest contribution. I actually preferred being vice president. Basia had the greater reputation as a scholar, greater contacts with others in the field, and was a wonderful motivator and idea-person. I liked the supporting role of making things happen behind the scenes, and I do miss our partnership. The greatest obstacle the Society faces, and will continue to face in the future, is encouraging new scholarship on Glaspell from young scholars coming up. There is a sacrifice that must be made, a marginalization, for those who choose to work on Glaspell. It may even negatively affect job searches, at least in this country [USA], especially as feminism and "neglected women writers" is basically a dead theoretical approach. And few graduate students are even reading Glaspell, so this is the challenge going forward.

NHR: Oh, yes, I agree with you. Sometimes including Glaspell in our syllabi is hard, and when we do, we also have to decide between using her most popular, and indeed superb, play *Trifles*, or the story version, "A Jury of Her Peers," or move beyond. I've actually been using *Trifles* just as a kind of trick to lead my students to other works by Glaspell. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. And this always presents a kind of dilemma for me: teaching again the "old" play that always works in class or showing something new? At the end of the day, those of us who are familiar with the society know that its mission statement is to make Glaspell's works, others than *Trifles* and "A Jury of her Peers," better known. Do you think the society has succeeded here?

Barbara Ozieblo: Although almost all of her plays have been performed in London and some in New York, *Trifles* is still the best known and that's probably because it's

short, easy to teach, not technically difficult to stage, and readers and audiences can identify with Minnie – even though we never get to see her. I wouldn't say that we have failed – but I would say that there is still work to be done!

NHR: I've always loved your zeal, Basia! What do you think, Martha? Do you agree with Basia that the society hasn't failed in its mission as regards moving beyond *Trifles*?

Martha Carpentier: Well, I believe there is a limit to what 10-12 people can really do. There are only 40-some members of the Society, a number that at least has held firm throughout, but of those members, fewer than 20 are really active scholars, and fewer than 10 really put the effort into staffing conference panels and making things happen on an annual basis. Given how few we are, what we have accomplished is great, particularly our publications. But to answer your specific question, perhaps a few of the plays like *The Verge* or *Inheritors* are better known, or performed more than in the past, but as regards her fiction, no, not much growth in readership or classroom teaching there, as far as I can see.

NHR: Oh, yes, I agree. It seems Glaspell's fiction is still pretty invisible, while at least her drama has some more visibility; actually, it seems to me that there is a lively interest in Glaspell's plays. Just to mention a few recent productions: New York-based Metropolitan Playhouse produced *Inheritors* (2005) and they have scheduled a staged reading of *Trifles* next October. Also in New York, the Ontological –Hysteric mounted *The Verge* (2009). And we should not forget the English Orange Tree Theatre, which, under the direction of Sam Walters, has produced *The Verge* (1997), *Trifles*, *Suppressed Desires*, *The Outside*, *Chains of Dew* (all in the same bill in 2008), Alison's *House* (2009) and the world premiere of *Springs Eternal* (2013). Basia, given your specialization in Glaspell's drama, why is she appealing to today's audiences? And, more especially, why do you think Glaspell has always enjoyed more recognition in Britain than in her own homeland?

Barbara Ozieblo: She appeals to today's audiences because the topics she deals with are still valid; today's society has not solved the problems Glaspell was interested in which hinge basically on the idea of personal freedom versus obligation to family and society. Think of *Inheritors* or *Chains of Dew*. But her plays do require us to think and react; Glaspell was against the theater as easy entertainment following a set pattern, and that probably accounts for her lack of popularity in the USA where theater has traditionally and principally been considered spectacle and entertainment.

NHR: I agree that, in general terms, US 1920s audiences were not that much ready for Glaspell, and that also explains why, even today, only little, daring companies in the US produce Glaspell now. It seems a hundred years later Broadway is not ready for Glaspell yet! In regard to fiction, Glaspell achieved considerable success, didn't she? Her novels ranked really high on best-seller charts. Martha, why would you say Glaspell's fiction is not enjoying this kind of revival too? Why would you recommend Glaspell's fiction? What makes her appealing? Choose one novel and tell us why.

Martha Carpentier: Back in the day I was told that it just doesn't pay publishers to reprint old novels because they don't sell. Yet two of Glaspell's novels have remained in print with Persephone Books, Ltd., in England: *Fidelity* and *Brook Evans*. When I have assigned Glaspell novels to graduate students, they have loved them, but with the demise of courses in women writers and feminist critical theory, the possibility of doing that has diminished. I had hoped that my affordable collection of her short stories would be more teach-able, and more usable in undergraduate courses, but while the book is still in print, I don't see it being used as a text book on any wide scale. We have been living for many decades in politically "backlash" times. The feminist imperative that began the movement to restore women writers to the canon

is long-gone and the fact that Glaspell never made it into American literature syllabi, where her fiction really belongs, keeps her on the edges. Her fiction is still eminently readable and enjoyable, but beyond that, she questions what it means to be an American in ways that are still extremely relevant. In terms of fictional structure and literary allusiveness, *Fugitive's Return* is her greatest novel; in terms of feminist issues and mother-daughter relations, *Brook Evans* is her greatest novel; in terms of interrogating our history of immigration, racial and ethnic prejudice, as well as predicting the movement toward adoption and single-parent families, *The Morning is Near Us* is her greatest novel.

Barbara Ozieblo: Just a quick reminder! Glaspell's novels were on the best-seller lists with Hemingway, Scott Fitzgerald and others. Her *Fugitive's Return* was fourth to Ernest Hemingway's first place with *Farewell to Arms*.

NHR: Well, after having considered why you founded the society, the current state of Glaspell scholarship and what you two think Glaspell can offer us today, what are your hopes for the society?

Martha Carpentier: I hope with all my heart that the Society not only survives but grows. I am glad that the current governing body has moved to Europe because, ironically, I feel that Glaspell's reputation and work have greater possibilities there for growth and appreciation.

NHR: And your hopes, Basia?

Barbara Ozieblo: My hopes are that it continues to grow – but not excessively! We know what happens to groups that outgrow their possibilities! I would love to see a younger generation of scholars taking Glaspell scholarship further. We started with a feminist approach, which then focused more on Glaspell as a modernist. We need to enrich our vision of Glaspell's work with new ideas and enthusiasm. I'm sure you and Emie [*Emeline Jouve, current Vice-President of the International Susan Glaspell Society*] will do that, but you also need to encourage dissertations on Susan Glaspell, and panels at conferences that will give the yet younger generation a chance to explore her work. And we need to promote interest in Glaspell's other plays and in her novels and stories.

NHR: Absolutely! Emeline Jouve and I are doing our best. Time for our last question. Do you think Glaspell will one day be acknowledged as the great writer she was? You know as well as I that the ISGS has tried twice to get Glaspell into the US Women's Hall of Fame. Where would you say the problem lies?

Barbara Ozieblo: I think the problem lies in the still prevailing general attitude that women are somehow inferior, so that in order to be acknowledged as a great writer you first have to overcome that prejudice. And then there's also the problem of theater being generally considered somehow immoral, light entertainment, not really art – the "bastard art" as Susan Harris Smith termed it.

NHR: So "all" that is needed is to end with gender prejudices and/or acknowledge that theater is a legitimate genre ... And what do you think, Martha?

Martha Carpentier: I would not use the US Women's Hall of Fame as an indicator – frankly I never thought much of it as an arbiter of value, nor do I think that it would have affected Glaspell's reputation much to have been admitted to that list, which is not an academic or scholarly one. I think our articles published in the online *Literary Encyclopedia* have done more than that (and may be one reason why her reputation is growing in Europe more than here, where I believe that resource is more popular). I

think if we could have gotten some or any of her works reprinted by Library of America (an idea suggested to me by Dean Schroll, but which I was unable to accomplish), that would have helped too. Any digitizing of her works we can promote will help. But I can't predict what will happen in the future. When I started my work on Glaspell I could never have predicted where it would lead, the friends and colleagues that have come together as a network, the national and international travel, the many publications and performances. So, all we can do is continue our work and try to pass the baton to future generations. The worthiness of Glaspell's life's work will always be there.

NHR: Sure we will keep on working! Thanks a lot for your time. As usual, it's been a pleasure talking with, and learning from, both of you.

NOTES

1. Link the ISGS Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/GlaspellSociety/>
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ABSTRACTS

Interview with Martha C. Carpentier and Barbara Ozieblo, cofounders of the Susan Glaspell Society and first presidents of the society. The interview was conducted by emails in June and July 2016.

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Subjects: Theater

Keywords: Susan Glaspell, American Theater, women writers

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